



The Mission at Waiilatpu

Waiilatpu, meaning, “place of the people of the rye grass,” is the site of a mission founded in 1836 among the Cayuse Indians by Marcus and Narcissa Whitman. As emigrants began moving across the continent into the Pacific Northwest during the 1840’s, the mission also became an important station on the Oregon Trail.

Stirred by accounts of explorers and traders, missionaries had become interested in the Oregon country in the 1820’s, but the remoteness of the area discouraged them. In 1833, an article in a New York Methodist publication described the visit to St. Louis of some western Indians seeking teachers and the white man’s “Book of Heaven”— the Bible. Although it was mostly fictional, the story stimulated missionary interest in work among the Native Americans in the Oregon country.

In 1835, the American Board of Foreign Missions, representing several Protestant churches, sent the Rev. Samuel Parker and Dr. Marcus Whitman to the Oregon country to select mission sites. On the way, the men talked to some Indians at a fur traders’ rendezvous and became convinced that the prospects were good. To save time, Parker continued on to explore Oregon for sites, and Whitman returned east to recruit more workers. Soon, the Rev. Henry Spalding and his wife, Eliza, William Gray, and Narcissa Prentiss, whom Whitman married on February 18, 1836, were headed westward in covered wagons.

The journey was a notable one in the story of the Oregon Trail. Narcissa Whitman and Eliza Spalding were the first white women to cross the continent overland, and the missionaries’ wagon, reduced to a cart, was the first vehicle to travel as far west as Fort Boise. Their successful trek inspired many families to follow.

The party reached the Columbia River on September 1, 1836. After a brief visit at Fort Vancouver, the Hudson’s Bay Company headquarters, the men returned up the Columbia to select their mission stations.

The women remained temporarily behind as guests of Chief Factor John McLoughlin.

Other mission societies were already active in Oregon. In 1834, Methodists under Jason Lee began work in the Willamette Valley. Later, Catholic missions were established along the lower Columbia.

The Whitmans opened their mission among the Cayuse at Waiilatpu, and the Spaldings among the Nez Perce at Lapwai, 110 miles to the east. The missionaries learned the Indian languages and assigned the words English spellings. Spalding printed books in Nez Perce and Spokane on a press brought to Lapwai in 1839—the first books published in the Pacific Northwest.

For part of each year the Indians went away to the buffalo country, the camas meadows, and the salmon fisheries in search of food. Whitman realized that the mission could not fulfill its purpose if the Indians remained nomadic. He therefore encouraged them to begin farming, but he had little success.



These portraits, thought to be Narcissa and Marcus Whitman, were painted by Drury Haight. There are no known photographs of the Whitmans, who were killed before the advent of cameras in the West. The Haight paintings are based on unidentified sketches by Paul Kane, who visited the mission in July 1847.

The Kane sketches are in the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.

The mission expanded gradually. Other missionaries, including the Rev. and Mrs. Cushing Eells, and the Rev. and Mrs. Elkanah Walker, arrived, and new stations were established. At Waiilatpu, the large adobe house, gristmill, sawmill, and blacksmith shop were constructed. William Gray built a house for himself that later served as an “emigrant house” for travelers.

But progress in spiritual matters was slow. The Indians were indifferent to religious worship, books, and school. In 1842, reports of dissension and the lack of funds caused the Board to order the Waiilatpu and Lapwai stations closed. Convinced that the missions should remain open, Whitman undertook a remarkable overland journey in mid-winter to plead his case personally with the Board. Accompanied by Asa Lovejoy, he left Waiilatpu on October 3, 1842. Pushing through blizzards and fording icy rivers, they traveled by way of Fort Hall, Taos, and Bent’s Fort. Whitman reached St. Louis on March 9, 1843, and arrived three weeks later at Boston, after stops at Washington, D.C., and New York. The Board, moved by his arguments, rescinded its orders.

The Oregon Trail. Whitman returned to Oregon with a wagon train in the Great Migration of 1843, serving as physician and guide. The year before, the first large group of emigrants passed almost the same way on what became known as the Oregon Trail, and they stopped for rest and supplies at the mission. They had taken wagons as far as Fort Hall, where they repacked their belongings and traveled the rest of the way by horse and foot. Whitman led the first wagon train all the way to the Columbia River on his return journey.

Although the main trail bypassed the mission after 1844, those who were sick and destitute turned to the mission for shelter and comfort. One such wagon brought the seven Sager children, who had been orphaned on the trail. With kindness and compassion, the Whitmans took the children into their family.

About Your Visit

Begin your visit at the visitor center, which is open daily except on Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1. Self-guiding trails lead to the mission site, the grave, and the monument. There is a picnic area, but camping and fires are not permitted. Overnight accommodations and meals are available in nearby towns. The site is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Contact: Superintendent, Rt. 2, Box 247, Walla Walla, WA 99362; www.nps.gov/whmi

For Your Safety

We want your visit to be a safe one. Please watch your children carefully, especially near the millpond and on the hill.

All areas in the National Park System are created for the use and enjoyment of the public in such a way that they are left undamaged for future generations. All animal and plant life, as well as other features in the park, are protected by law. Leave the flowers, birds, and park facilities in good condition when you leave.

